NEWS — 2025 ELECTIONS

Winchester League of Women Voters holds first candidate debate

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The town election is being held on March 22 at Winchester High School. The Winchester League of Women Voters on March 5 held its first candidate debate for the Select Board. WINCHESTER NEWS FILE PHOTO

The finances of the town, specifically how to raise revenue and d
looming $3.5 million budget shortfall, was the main topic of deba

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Select Board candidates night forum at the Jenks Center.

The March 5 debate was sponsored by the Winchester League of Women Voters (LWV).

There are two seats, with three-year terms, on the ballot. Incumbent John Fallon is not running.

The candidates for those seats are corporate financial officer and former budget officer of the Chicago Transit Authority Paras Bhayani, Select Board member and incumbent Anthea Brady, Winchester Zoning Board of Appeals member and lawyer Dorothy Simboli and real estate developer and former Planning Board member Richard Welch Jr.

Election Day is Saturday, March 22.

Corporate financial officer and former budget officer of the Chicago Transit Authority Paras Bhayani is running for the Select Board. COURTESY PHOTO

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Budget issues include paying for new curricula in the schools and increasing employee health insurance, salary, pension and retirement costs. There will also be a need to rebuild or refurbish the Muraco Elementary School.

“Winchester is in a critical place in its history; we’re facing a challenging fiscal reality,” Bhayani acknowledged. “We need a comprehensive plan to balance services and costs. We can identify efficiencies, but after that we’ll need to go to the taxpayers for additional money,” possibly a reference to a tax override.

“We need a long-term game plan,” Simboli agreed. “We should consider an override, but it needs to be right sized. It requires strategic planning. At Town Meeting, we see things at the end of the process. I want to get involved earlier in the process.”

“It’s something we say every year, but this year the budget is critical,” Brady said. “It’s not because we did anything wrong, but, in the last few years, costs have gone up.”

She added Free Cash could be in the short run to cover costs, but an override might be necessary and the Select Board is forming a State of the Town Committee to “discuss what an override might look like.”

“An override is the last thing we should do,” Welch countered. “I understand we’ll need Free Cash, but development should be our main focus, not an override. Everything should be done to avoid that.”

He also feels, “Public employees need to feel they’re working in one of the best towns. We need to support them so they do the best job for the town.”

Another part of the town’s financial obligations are improving an maintaining capital assets.

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"We need continuity around a Capital Plan," Brady said and pointed to work on the library and playgrounds as priorities "to make sure families stay in Winchester when their children play."

Select Board incumbent Anthea Brady is seeking re-election. COURTESY PHOTO

Simboli suggested use of resources from the federal Economic Development Administration (EDA) to help identify and prioritize projects and Community Preservation Act (CPA) funds for work on buildings deemed historic.

"We need a five-year plan and a way to find new capital," Bhayani reiterated, referring to an override "dedicated for capital projects" and using CPA funds.

Welch said he would "go around to each asset and get an opinion to determine the most effective ways to address issues."

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Economic development questions

Economic development is an element of raising capital by widening the tax base. Among the questions prepared by the LWV in conjunction with voters posed by moderator Nell Forgacs, of the Sudbury LWV, was how to enhance economic and cultural elements in the town.

“It’s no surprise some businesses are struggling downtown,” Simboli answered. “A lot of that is related to parking.”

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She suggested a parking plan “to encourage people to move vehicles,” as opposed to parking downtown for long periods of time, which negatively affects businesses and/or satellite parking areas and a shuttle service to ‘bring people in.’” Simboli also said satellite parking areas would provide parking for employees in downtown businesses.

Brady reiterated her points about playgrounds, but added comments about how use of those near downtown can affect businesses positively.

“We have a lot of families with kids that go to school here,” she said. “Letting people stay in town for recreation will help economic vitality.”

Echoing Simboli, she added, “Our downtown is walkable, but getting there can be difficult. Bringing people into downtown without them having to drive would be helpful.”

Bhayani agreed.

“Keeping families in Winchester has a spillover effect on downtown,” he said. “It drives people to businesses.”

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He also warned putting too much of the tax burden on business and commercial development is a disincentive for development.

Welch said he'd also like to see a shuttle service of some kind and suggested having more housing for seniors downtown "so they can stay in Winchester" and, presumably, patronize local businesses.

Zoning Board of Appeals member Dorothy Simboli is seeking a seat on the Select Board. COURTESY PHOTO

Housing in Winchester

The question about business dovetailed with a question about increasing housing in the town, particularly affordable housing, possibly on town-owned land. Welch feels 55+ housing will increase the tax base while not affecting school costs.

Bhayani suggested modest projects be pursued.

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"We need balanced and responsible growth that includes diverse housing stock and we need to be friendly to developers," Simboli answered. "We've missed some opportunities, but let's not let others go by."

In additional comments, Welch agreed, "Downtown can be developed, but we can do a better job negotiating with developers. The incentive is they get to build in Winchester."

Brady commented, "We don't have a lot of town-owned land."

Board collaboration

Another question was about how to have the Select Board, School Committee and Finance Committee work together.

"I'm committed to supporting the School Department and would like to work with the School Committee and Finance Committee to enhance transparency," Bhayani answered. "There's a great need for transparency. I believe we share a lot of goals. I feel my background will serve the town well and my style is collaborative. I've encouraged the School Committee to compete for state aid, but we'll need a local source of funds as well."

"The School Committee and superintendent are experts on education," Simboli answered. "I trust them, but I'd love to have them reach out to the Finance Committee for guidance because the School Department represents 70% of our budget."

Welch feels the three boards should meet in public "so everybody can see how everybody works together. That might be a step in the right direction."

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Real estate developer and former Planning Board member Richard Welch is looking to be elected to the Select Board. COURTESY PHOTO

"We need to trust the School Committee and superintendent as experts in education, but need to encourage more frequency of them meeting," Brady added. "I've done a lot of work with boards and know what their needs are."

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She also feels the boards should collaborate in pursuing state and federal aid and noted the current School Department ask is a level services budget.

The final questions posed to the candidates was about banning use of anticoagulant rodenticides on town property and possibly private property, which prevents clotting and leads to internal bleeding and the death of rodents, but is also a health hazard to birds. All four agreed they should not be used.

The answers were symptomatic of the general level of agreement among candidates. Referring to the high level of achievement and commitment to the town among the rivals, Welch commented, “We can’t go wrong regardless of what happens in the election.”

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Friday, March 13, beginning at 7:30 p.m., live in-person and live streamed from the stunning Ripley Chapel at First Congregational Church, Winchester, 21 Church St., join in with Syldason, a duo concert featuring Sylvie Zakarian,

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